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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

A QUESTION OF BORDERS

By

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May 11, 1992

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Part I: Introduction

The purpose of this Thesis is to explore the use of borders. On one level, borders between countries and continents, both natural and man made, will be looked at. On another level, the actual physical borders of the paint and the paintings will be addressed.

This exploration involves two main areas; inspiration and development, and process and techniques. Both of these areas contain unique issues which are equally important to the development of the Thesis. Within these main areas there are several specific categories of inquiry which I have addressed throughout my two years of study. Each category has contributed to the complete development of my ideas and artwork. My goals and direction have been changed and reworked several times due to the influences of these categories of inquiry. Throughout the entire process though, the main concept of "A Question of Borders" has remained as a very vital, expansive topic.

The origin of the Thesis began at the end of my undergraduate studies. At that time I was working on large, figurative oil paintings. I felt the need to expand beyond these

studies to a broader, more conceptual area. At that time I began to consider the idea of combining the map of the world with the figure. From these early paintings, which utilized a contour line map of the world, I considered using the theme of mapping as a concentration for my work. To begin with, the concepts of universality and global unity fueled my thoughts and research.

While exploring these concepts, I looked through several resources ranging from books on global conservation, to picture books illustrating satellite photography techniques. Gathering all this material made me realize that the topic of mapping is quite large and varied. At this point I had to make several formal decisions concerning subject matter, content, form, and technique.

The first major decision which I made concerned the use of the figure. I felt very strongly about including a figurative element in my work, since we as human beings, are intricately tied into the land which forms our world. The problem became; which element, the land or the figure, is more important? At this point I was treating both in the same way with the same intensity and importance. To decide which element was more important, I began to simplify my images to the point where only the least amount of form represented the idea of figure or

land. I felt that the land was my main interest and that a human presence can be implied through abstract methods. From this stage on I concentrated only on land forms with an emphasis on borders and edges.

The chapters which follow will expand upon the development of the concepts and techniques of my Thesis, "A Question of Borders". As I gather the material related to this topic, I realize that it still truly is a question- how and why do borders exist? A Syrian astronaut with insight from a different perspective simply stated, "From space I saw Earth- indescribably beautiful with the scars of national boundaries gone". (Kelley 1988, 76)

Part II: Inspiration and Development

There are three main areas of inspiration and development of my Thesis. They are mapping, history and politics, and social issues. All of these issues contain elements which are contemporary as well as grounded in an historical context. In addition, certain artists and their works have effected my interpretation of each issue. The first of these to be addressed is mapping.

Chapter I: Mapping

I have always been attracted to the contour of the land forms of the Earth. From my first lessons in geography to more in depth Earth sciences classes I have found land forms to be very beautiful. In particular, the combination of the physical aspects with the innate conceptual levels has captured my interest. There are many different kinds of mapping techniques available now ranging from topographical maps to population maps. All of them use the contour of the land as a framework, a symbolic setting through which is communicated a specific physical or humanistic characteristic associated with that land. I found that this is the key. We choose to view the land from

whatever perspective suits our needs. Especially since these maps can be simplified and utilize symbols which are commonly known, they are an ideal form of communication.

Maps are an instantly recognizable form of communication- as familiar as the alphabet or an image of a house. Even when we don't know exactly what they mean, we know they mean something. Visually, the map operates somewhere between the printed page and the painted canvas; it is a surface which is both looked at and read, scanned and deciphered. (Smith p.5)

Since my goal has been to communicate through my art, I realized that this kind of landscape is the ideal source for my inspiration.

Another influence on my attraction to mapping was my discovery of the work of Pat Steir. Although her work does not deal directly with maps or mapping concepts she does deal with symbols and history and her own reactions to the act of painting. Some examples of her work which I find most closely relate to my own are "Three Green Days" and "Border Lord". (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) As Marti Mayo, the Curator of the Contemporary Museum of Houston, describes Ms. Steir's work she states:

...squares of tonal gradations in browns and grays are present on the grids and fields in these paintings. The squares are similar in form to the color bars used by photographers to measure accuracy of the color when

photographing an object, and refer, for Steir, to the presence as well as the 'truth'. The paintings of this period each have some sort of central shape which echoes the shape of the canvas, and they are bound by formal borders painted by the artist. Drips of paint in the works all refer to the process of art making. (Mayo 1983, 8)

Looking at these images, layered with grids, symbols, and a diversity of mark I can see my own ideas emerging. There is a real beauty in the combination of graphic elements and expressive marks. This is the visual information from which I drew my inspiration.

Additionally I feel that there is significance to the fact that Pat Steir is female. I enjoy the work of many artists both male and female but I have found it to be more difficult to associate myself and my experiences with those of Jackson Pollack, Franz Klein, Robert Motherwell, and many other prominent artists from this time. They have definitely influenced me and some of their individual works are among my favorites, but I feel much closer to their influences as sifted through other even more contemporary artists such as Ms. Steir. I do feel that there is a uniqueness to the feminine perspective and as there is very little history of woman artists, I am among the first generations of women who have the opportunity to command a spot in the

history of the art world. Another artist, Judy Chicago aptly states,

As the women develop as artists, they build skills that are relevant to their content. Their work improves and they become more sophisticated, but that sophistication is built on a solid, personal foundation and is not the result of imitating prevailing art modes. (Peterson 1976 138)

A splinter of the idea of mapping is photography and technology. I included looking at photographs of the land ranging from professional photographers to the most advanced Landsat and satellite technologies. This avenue even further broadened my experience of the land and ways of mapping.

In the last 200 years there has been a gradual broadening of our perspective, beginning with observations from hot-air and hydrogen balloons in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then aircraft reconnaissance and photography in the first half of the twentieth. In the past twenty years we have advanced to space observation and measurement, and a truly global view. (Sheffield 1981, 7)

With the technology of the world today, we look at the land from a whole new perspective. My paintings and drawings reflect this new perspective of borders in the landscape.

An artist who deals with mapping from this technological perspective is Nancy Graves.

Her work is deeply grounded in map forms-Graves' maps are often somewhat mysterious to the ordinary viewer ; they derive from the latest technologies of satellite photography and remote sensing. She is drawn to them not only because they reflect, to her mind, the most advanced state of human knowledge, but because they are also consistent with her ongoing preoccupation with the multiplicity of forms found in nature. (Smith 1981, 7)

As I looked at her work, such as "Librium" or "Untitled (Heat Density Cyclone)", (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) I enjoyed the energy and contrast of the organic marks against the graphic, grid like elements. Her use of the current technology available and her ability to add personal interpretation are both present in my work as well.

In summation I found that mapping and satellite imaging create a firm foundation for my exploration of borders, which is my personal perspective that I wish to bring to the image of the landscape. The ability to tap into the symbol and the beauty of the map as well as the power of the graphic verses the the organic has provided for me a vast "vocabulary" to use in my images.

The next element to be looked into, is the historical and political significance of this untraditional, contemporary choice of landscape painting. History and politics do not seem to have a

lot to do with mapping, although in this context of my Thesis, this second category of inquiry becomes an interesting, important element.

Chapter II: History and Politics

The second main aspect of my inspiration and development relates to history and politics. It was no coincidence that I felt drawn to the map of the world and in particular, to the issue of borders when the world around me has been going through so many changes. It also is significant to understand that this has been the case for the entirety of our human history. There is no way to separate the land from its history or to separate politics from the land.

The two most recent events which have shaped my thinking about borders and the land are the fall of the Berlin wall and the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic. When it became official on November 11, 1989, that the Berlin wall was no longer in existence both as a physical border and as a political concept, I realized that the world was no longer organized as it had been. All the maps had to be redone and our thinking about Germany had to change. For me this was a change which was not a change back as it was for people who were alive when there was one Germany. This was something new which really made me question the concept of borders, especially man made ones. As a people, we choose to impose

these abstract political and social concepts on our land and then we abstractly try to represent these ideas on maps. We all understand it, or do we? I think we understand only when we consider one perspective. If we step back and consider the big picture, the land as our world, these political concepts become more and more difficult to come to grips with.

The second series of events to deeply effect my thinking was the separation of the Baltic states from the USSR, in 1991. When Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were struggling for their independence it became apparent that there would be a separation and a restructuring of this huge and politically powerful country. The concept of borders really came into play as areas were separating based on their historically established boundaries and because of differences in political ideologies. Again, my concept of the world was changed. Our powerful symbol of the map now contained new meanings and what was our reality now was our history. The USSR was even without a flag, another national, political symbol; they had lost yet another representation of their boundaries and borders.

These examples question the relevance of borders and show how transient they can be. This raises questions about the origins of these seemingly arbitrary borders. A good example of

this is in the Drakensberg plateau in South Africa.

Here, politics is intertwined with the landscape; the lowlands is white South Africa, the highland plateau is black Lesotho which is completely circled by South Africa. How did this curious arrangement of borders come to exist? The bleak, windswept, treeless plateau, entirely underlain by lava, contained nothing of interest to the white colonists. The ground was too high and too cold to be suitable for any agriculture other than grazing cattle...Lavas do not contain gold or diamonds. (Francis 1984, 18)

From above, this physical difference is apparent yet it seems as if the whole area should be one. Clearly politics effect our perspectives of the land.

I kept these historical and political ideas in mind when I chose the areas of the world to look at and represent. I want to show areas of change and turmoil, or places where humans have taken over, from a new point of view. The view from above seems so peaceful and positive because only the natural beauty of the land can be seen and the emotional impact of the new perspective takes over. Areas like Iran and Iraq reflect this. As they fight over the land at the mouth of the Tigris river, their conflict is a bitter, tragic display of the effects of "religious fervour, political opportunism, and personal rivalry." (Francis 1984, 46) My work reflects an attempt to put politics and

history into a secondary place and to try to experience the land in a new light. As Carl Sagan stated, "Molecules don't have passports. All the creatures on Earth are in this together." (Easwaran 1989, 132)

Chapter III: Social Issues

The final area of interest to my in inspiration and development is social issues. This area is very closely tied into politics and history but it takes on a slightly different tone. I want my work to touch upon issues of global importance, thus the use of the map. In my images I shift edges, combine countries where they do not exist in reality, and I try to integrate different areas of the world.

The most important issue to me is interdependency. I feel that the world has advanced to a state where one can no longer only think of "me", and "my" concerns. We have to consider the concerns of the planet. As with the case of pollution and waste:

However fiercely we try to defend our borders against armed invasion, no defense can protect us from the effects of another country's pollution. Smog produced in Detroit poisons lakes in Canada. Radioactive fallout from Chernobyl threatens children in the Netherlands. Toxic chemicals released into the Rhine river in Switzerland harm seals in the North Sea. During the nineteen-eighties we came to understand that pollution is a problem that transcends national boundaries. No single country can flourish unless all change their ways. (Easwaran 1989,135)

Clearly, the need to think in a global manner is here. One has to

rethink the concept of borders and its application to social issues around the world. I feel that social issues is a concept which refers to the ability to think in terms of people, not land or politics or borders. There comes a time when the conservation of our culture as a planet overrides our concepts of individual cultures around the world. By showing the land from a different perspective I am showing that there are other options for the way people think.

The most important social issue to me is the idea of war. While I am not directly commenting on peace and war in my work, I feel that when the idea of borders comes up then naturally the concept of protecting that border arises, otherwise why would their existence be necessary. Borders can help people organize and in many cases be positive things but so often they are very negative. My images do not reflect the negative. The images become more of a romantic view of how things could be and really, how they are now if only a new perspective is taken. Mahatma Gandhi ties this idea of positive energy in to the idea of conservation.

I have learnt through bitter experience the one supreme lesson to conserve my anger, and as heat conserved is transmitted into energy, even so our anger controlled can be transmuted into a power which can move the world. (Easwaran 1989, 106)

These social issues became more of a personal fuel and a point where an emotional response to the land and borders was possible. Even as the Thesis is completed, these sources of my inspiration and development are very important issues which I still question and I plan to work with in the future

Part III: Processes and Techniques

All of the pieces which constitute the body of work called “A Question of Borders” fall into the category of abstract landscapes. I chose the technique of abstraction because I wanted the act of painting to be a part of the work and I feel that abstraction is most closely tied to the ideas behind my work. As Nancy Graves has stated, “Mapping encompasses all our significant efforts. It is the most advanced level of conceptual abstraction we have at the moment.” (Smith 1981, 11) What follows is a detailed discussion of the creative process involved with each of the works in the Thesis.

Chapter I: Works on Paper

The first series of work on the Thesis to emerge was the “Key Series” of works on paper. Prior to their start I was struggling with my materials, trying to decide what medium best suited my ideas. At one point I abandoned my research, took out a sheet of Rives BFK, and I began to draw while looking at a map of the Soviet Union. As I became caught up in thinking about the turbulence and activity of the people of that land, I found I was

rapidly moving across the paper with my watercolor brush. That is how the series began.

With each of these works on paper I began with a loose watercolor base covering the entire sheet of paper with color fields or symbols of land markings. Next, I added areas of gouache to add thickness and a density to certain areas. They also added an intensity and a chalkiness to the palette which the watercolors do not have. I then took charcoal, conte crayon, and pastels, and built up areas of firm markings over the painted surface to emphasize borders and edges. To further add a man made intrusion to the land, I added areas of block prints. Wood scrapes were painted and pressed in a layering pattern across the surface. In some of the pieces I collaged actual road maps on to the surface to play-off of their built-in symbolism. Finally, the graphic elements of the boxes, or keys, were added on top. This allows them to appear to be floating over the land highlighting different areas. When viewed all together the box floats through all the pieces and seems to appear and reappear between the works. There are seven pieces in all, two of which are included in the Thesis work. They are "Key Series I" and "Key Series II". (ILL. 1 and ILL. 2)

The concepts of mapping, borders and edges had become

more of a springboard for the creation of the series. The ideas remained important but the process of arriving at the concepts, and the process of actually drawing and painting became important too. While they may seem void of any tangible sense of subject matter, there is a dialogue going on on the surface, where the marks themselves are the subject matter and the shape and application of these marks vibrate and seem to swirl on the paper. There is a heightened sense of energy prevalent in this "Key Series" which I carried over to my works on canvas.

Chapter II: Works on Canvas-Gouache and Oil

There was a quality of freshness, excitement, and distillation of my ideas which clearly showed with my works on paper. I wanted to achieve those same qualities with my works on canvas. It became an intense challenge to switch mediums yet retain that life. To solve the problem I turned to colored gesso. I prepared three canvases with normal white gesso and then proceeded to create two separate pieces, "The Baltic"(ILL. 3) and "Marking the Land".(ILL. 4) These are my experiment with oil on gouache.

After I laid out my three painted canvases, I mixed several containers of white gesso and gouache. What resulted was a series of chalky, pastel colors. I chose to tint the gesso with gouache because I was trying to avoid the thickness and the quality of acrylics. Also, the gouaches were used in the works on paper and I hoped to transfer my results through the use of the same media. I used large brushes and sticks to create the under painting of gouache-gesso mix. Large fields of color were accompanied by more graphic mapping elements. I chose the pattern of borders after looking at several maps of the USSR's

Baltic states. The result was a very interesting play of marks on the canvas. This is the point where the idea of multiple canvases in one painting occurred to me.

The three canvases which I was working on seemed to fit together like puzzle pieces. This combining of panels also emphasized the grid of the map, the separation of frames in satellite photography, and the inclusion of an irregular border. When the works were finished they became two pieces which each contained two panels irregularly joined together as one. After they clearly separated into two works I began the second step of the process; I added the layer of oil paint.

I was unsatisfied with the first layer of water based paint. I decided to add a layer of oil on top to achieve a richer surface and to emphasize the layering of concepts on the land. I began with large color fields and areas of drips. The colors became bolder and this allowed for a nice contrast to the subtle under painting. To create areas which were keys, I blocked off the canvas and applied a loose wash of oil in the remaining exposed areas. This allowed for viewing the under painting through a color screen. At this time I began to apply my experience with the work of Jasper Johns. I wanted to incorporate some of the energy and surface variation of his map painting into my own

work. One interpretation of his piece "Map"(Fig. 5) is as follows.

In the 1961 Map, the various states often seem about to disappear within the highly active topography of brushwork which has made them visible. The surface is in flux, in momentary suspension. The painting seems to illustrate with particular accuracy Johns' contention that the use of known images frees him to concentrate on other things; in this case, a barrage of skitterish bravura brushwork seems to have his attention, and we are treated to a display of 'pure painting'...(Smith 1981, 8-9)

This is the kind of attention to the process of painting that I applied to my own work. The completed images have a rich sense of color variation in addition to a sense of painting for painting and not only a means of expressing the concepts which I had been considering. The next stage was the completion of three canvases on which I painted directly with oils.

Chapter III: Works on Canvas- Oil

In this last series of work which I created for the Thesis project, I dealt with three images directly with oil on canvas. While I enjoyed the previous experiment in process, I also wanted some work to reflect my interest in oils alone. I felt that I needed to expand my experience with the media. The pieces in this group are "Red Land Red Sea" (ILL. 5), "Exposure" (ILL. 6), and "From Above" (ILL. 7).

For all the pieces I used a very thin, watered down coat of gesso to start. I then used rags, soaked in paint and medium, and I rubbed the rags on the surface of the canvas. What resulted was a chalky, misty coat of paint which turned out to be very atmospheric and tied into my romantic view of the land. I enjoyed this more washed out experience and I looked for other ways to enhance this process.

At this time the work of Helen Frankenthaler was reintroduced to me. After viewing a movie on her method of creating a work of art, I became interested in her washes and soaked through images. Also her works on paper interested me. (Fig. 6) There is a level of understanding to her work, of subject matter and process which I wanted to incorporate into my own

work.

Every aspect of her art is conveyed in her control over the medium. In her painting, she lets the technique work with her and for her-whether in the quality of the color as it soaks into the canvas, the fuzziness of the edges of the poured shapes of color, or the heavy impasto of her various brushworks. (Krens 1980, 47)

Following this example, my next step involved pouring.

I mixed a medium of turpentine, water, and oil paint. I then poured the mixture on to the canvas and guided the soaking by tilting the canvas. Since the layer of gesso was thin and irregular, some of the mixture soaked into the fibers of the canvas while some of it ran along the surface. This was the kind of interaction with the medium which I wanted to achieve. I then proceeded with thicker brushwork and layering of some graphic map symbols. In several cases I used sandpaper to rub away the areas of the keys rather than adding on to the surface. This added to the misty quality. One piece, "Red Land Red Sea", was built up more than the others. Here I was experimenting with how far I wanted to build and overlap on the land.

In this series, each piece refers to a different area of the world, yet they all flow together. My decision to keep the

canvases unframed was to show them as units of a whole, with irregular edges which represent the continuation of the land. In the end the process seemed to be simple, all I needed was to respond to the image and allow the technique to develop. All my work experimenting paid off. I was to the point where I could tell which technique was the best to use to represent this area of borders.

Part IV : Conclusion

In conclusion, this Thesis Project, "A Question of Borders" has been a journey of concept and process. My research exposed me to the unique area of mapping and photographic imagery, allowed for an expression of history and politics, and heightened my awareness of social issues. In addition, I explored many new processes over my two year stay here, and I discovered those which are best suited to my means of expression.

In particular, the concept of borders was thoroughly looked into. This was in both a conceptual way with my research, and in a physical way with the actual paintings. Borders were the theme to which I kept returning. I have found that as I conclude this project that there is so much more about this subject for me to explore and I have had to choose which direction to take at many crossroads during this project. I would like in the future, to go back to some of those places and try the different path. It is very satisfying to know that my work with maps and borders is now in line with my artistic goals for the future. I can not say that I would do anything differently as decisions had to be made and I am happy with the

way in which I handled them. My only regret is not having enough time to take it one more, two more steps further. While the Thesis has forced me to define and articulate my motives and inspirations for the series "A Question of Borders", the Thesis show was my first, formal showing of a cohesive body of work. I feel that I am free now to go on and continue as a professional artist. As I think of my vision for the future these thoughts come to mind.

This beauty consists of subtle nuances, as in the miraculous balance of soft and brilliant hues. Only a child in its innocence could apprehend the purity and splendor of this vision.-Patrick Baudry Astronaut (Kelley 1988, 63)

Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning of the world'. (Brakhage 1963, 30)

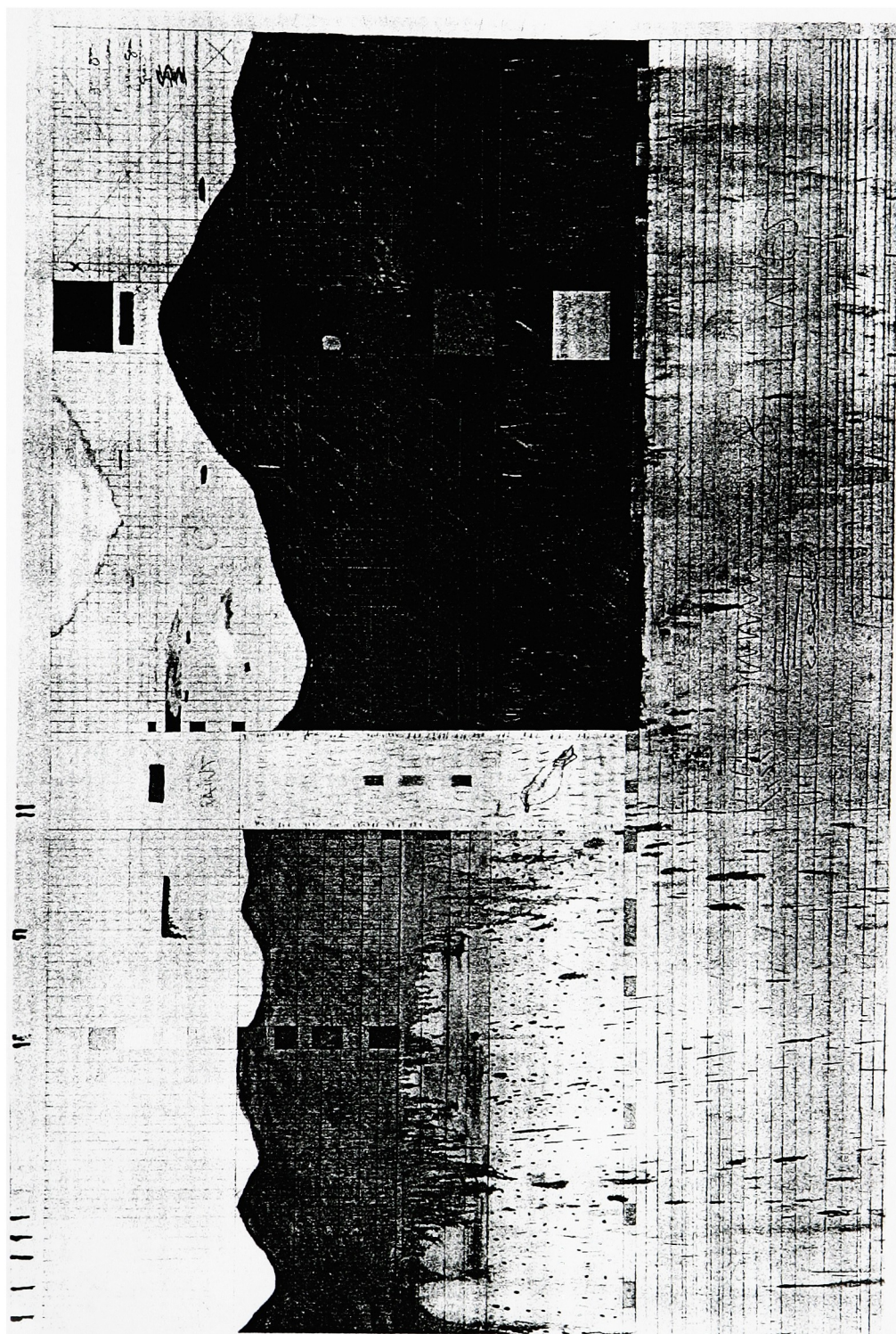


Fig. 1

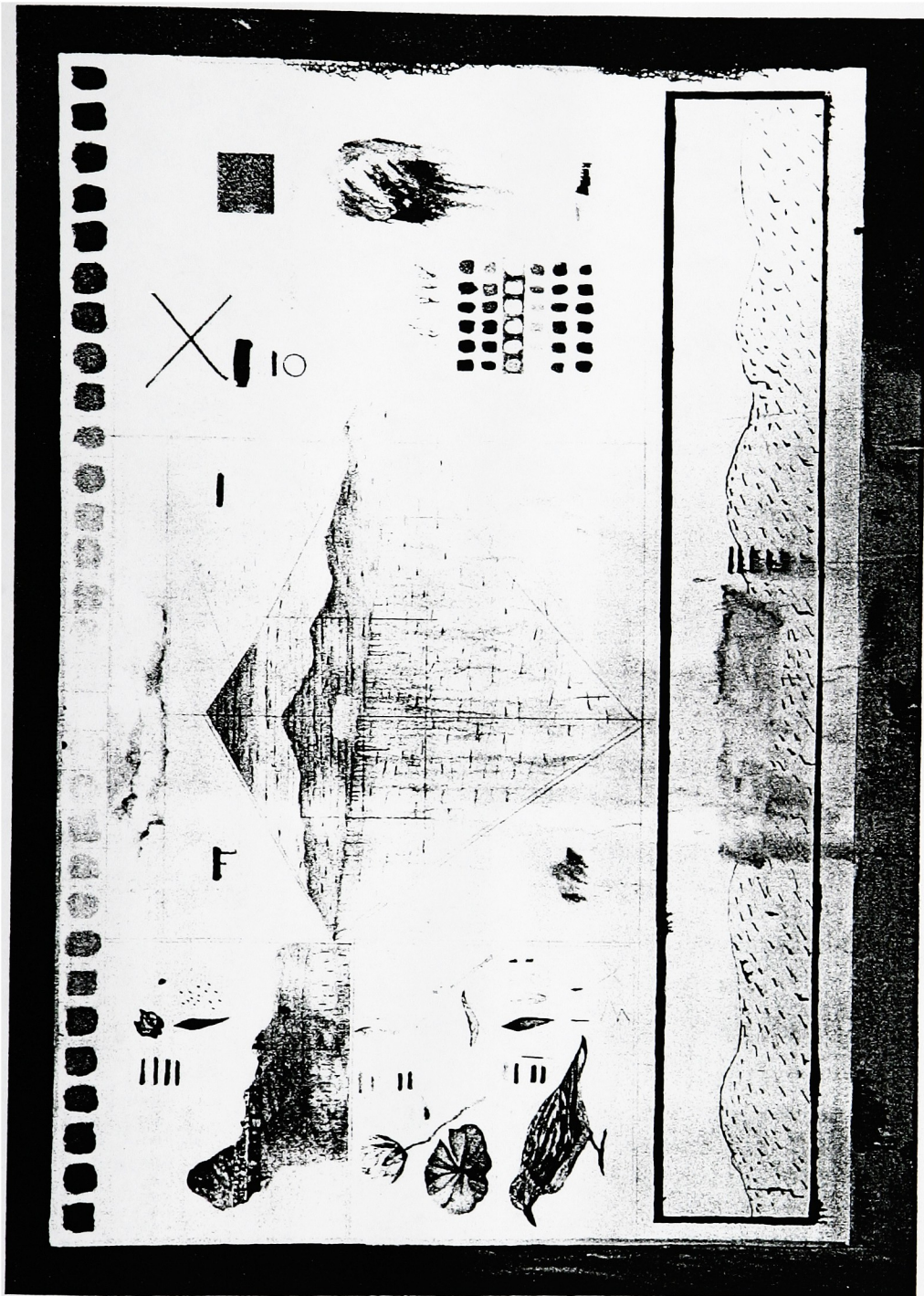


Fig. 2

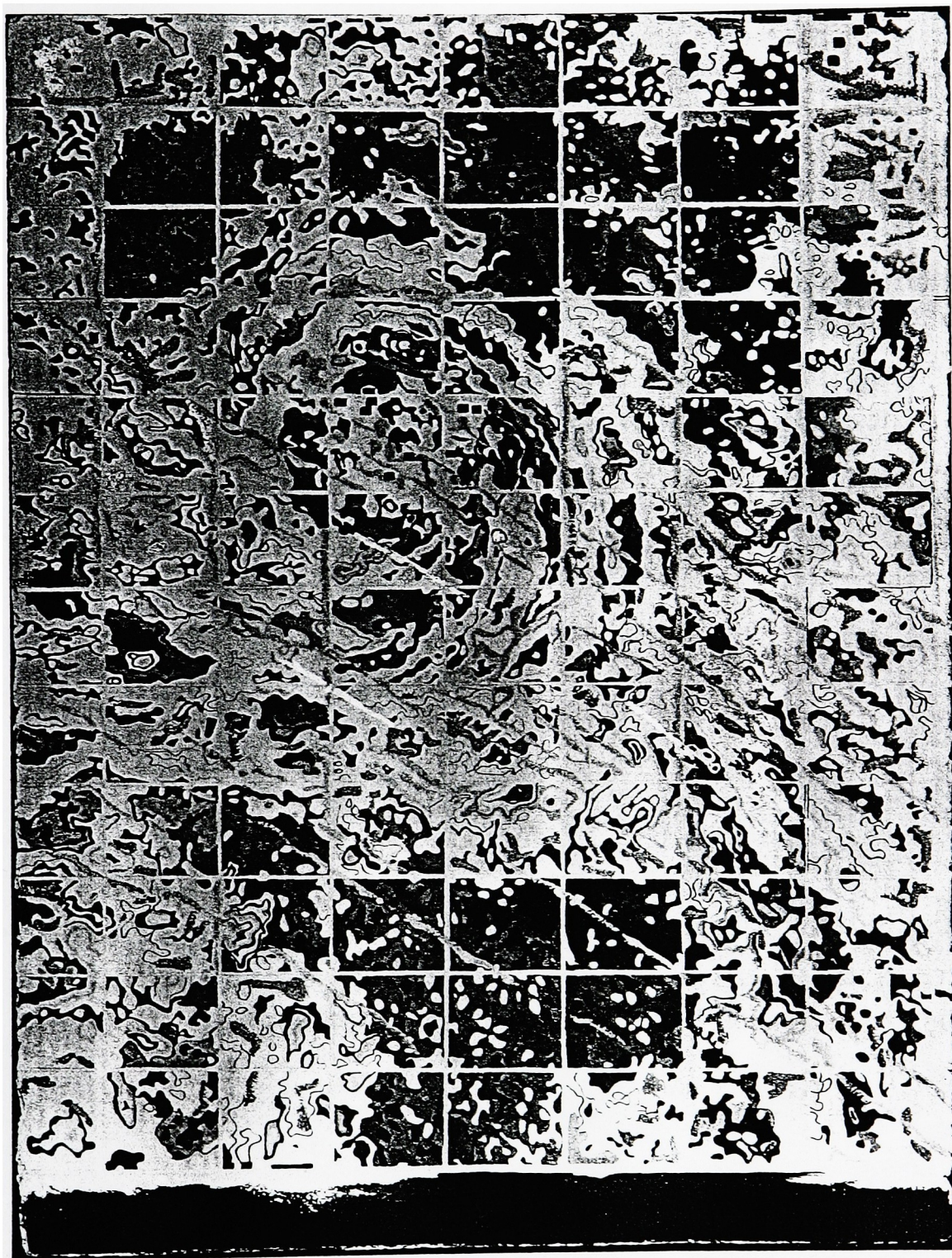


Fig. 3

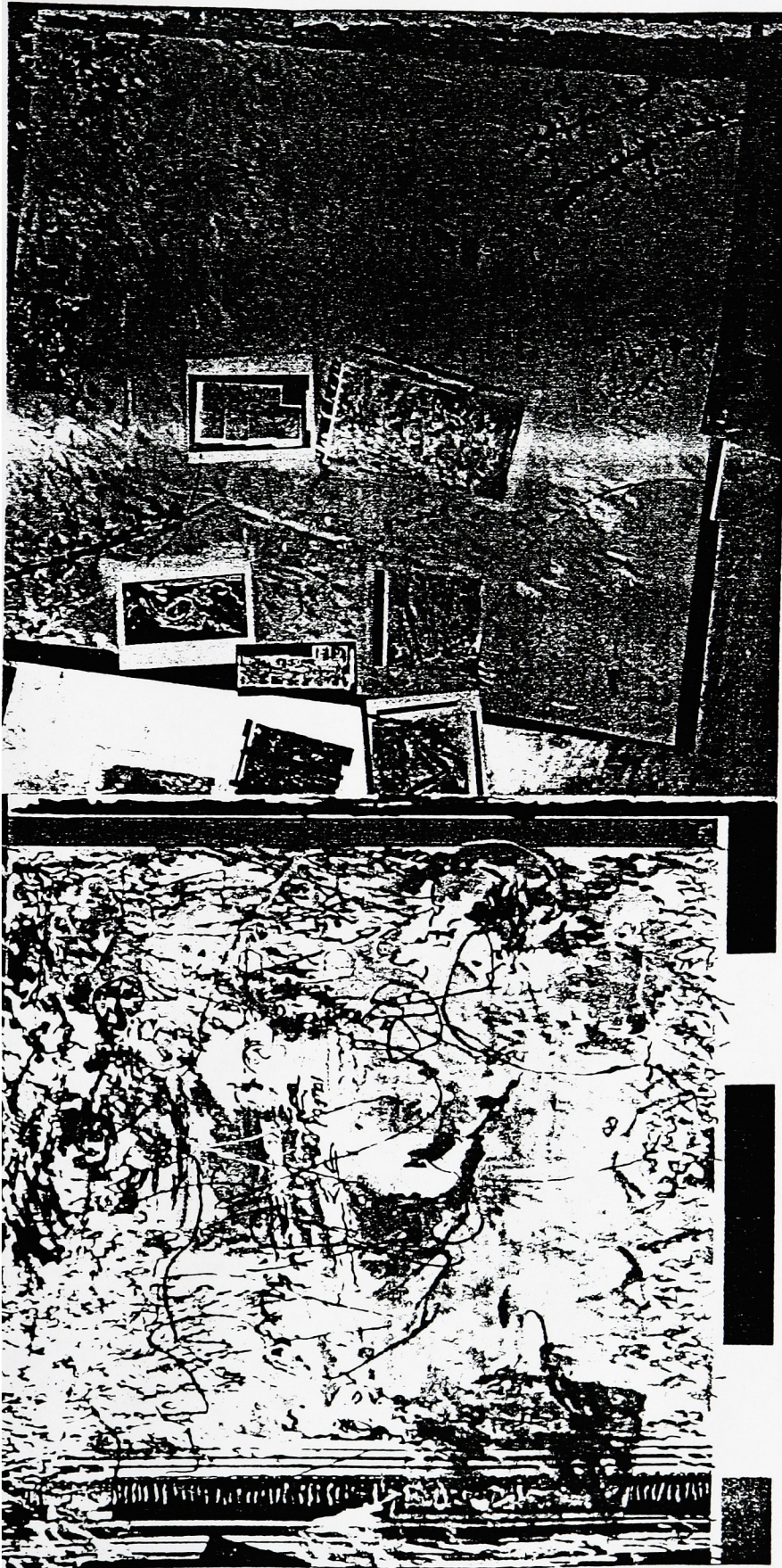


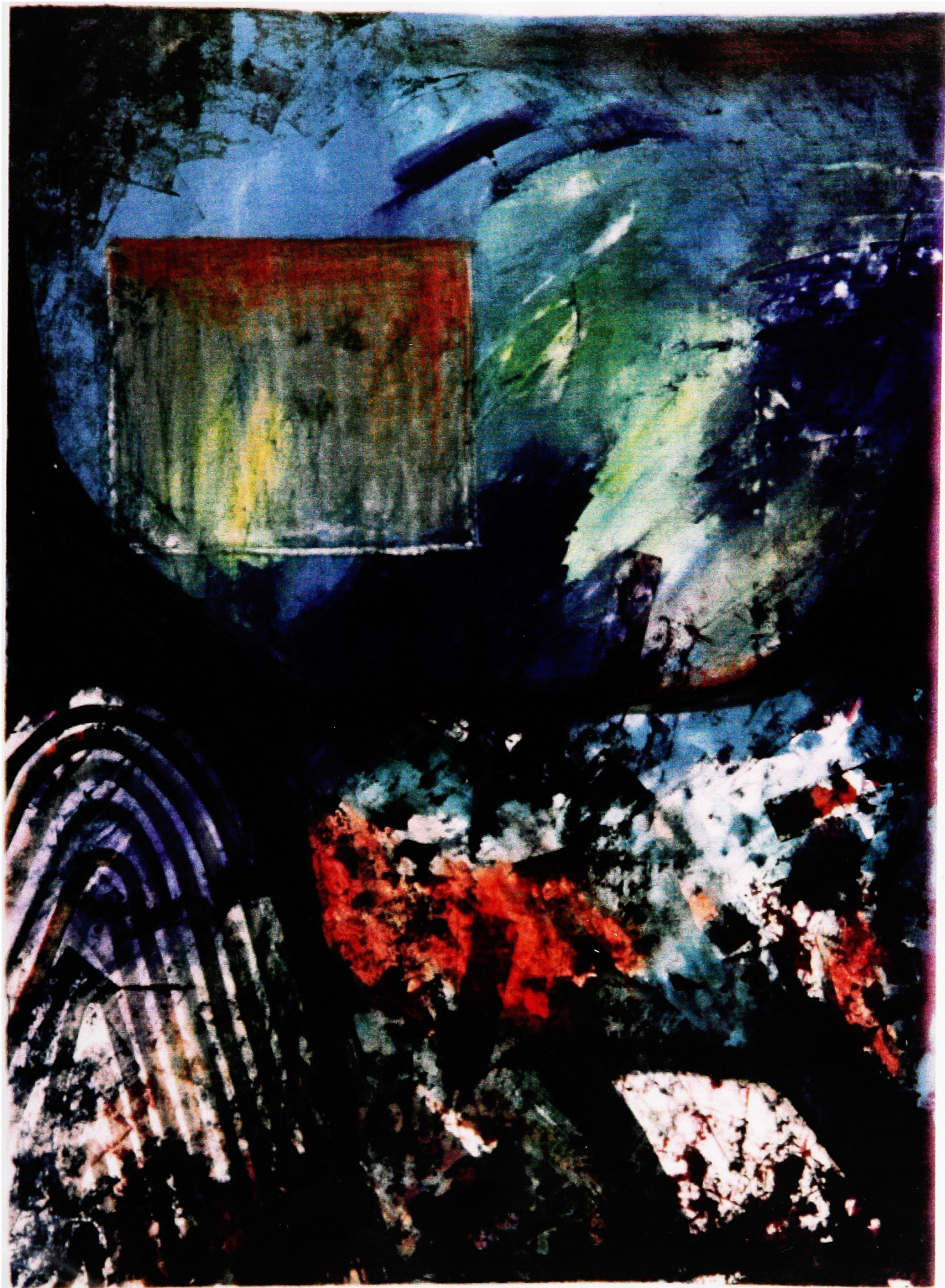
Fig.4

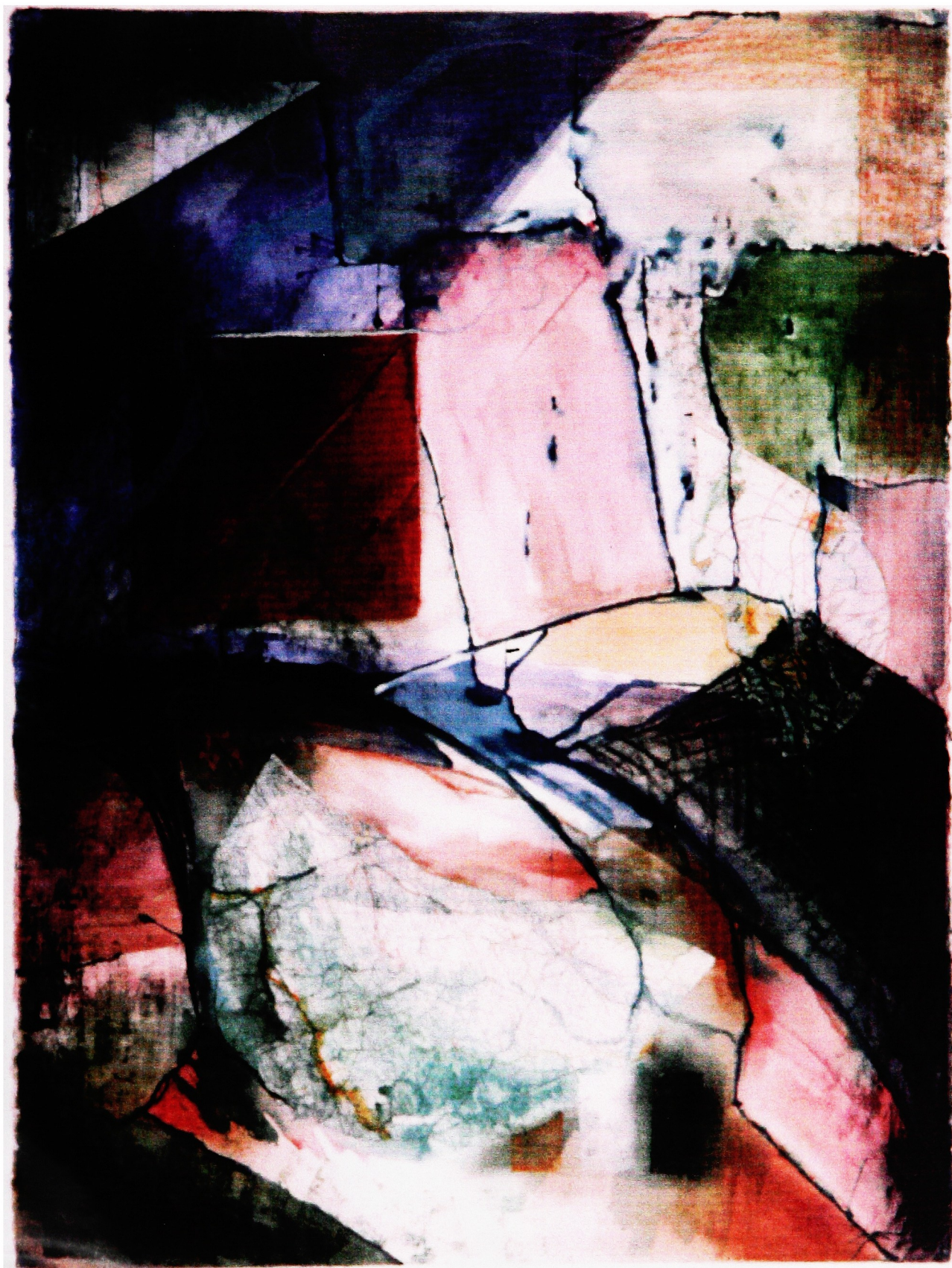


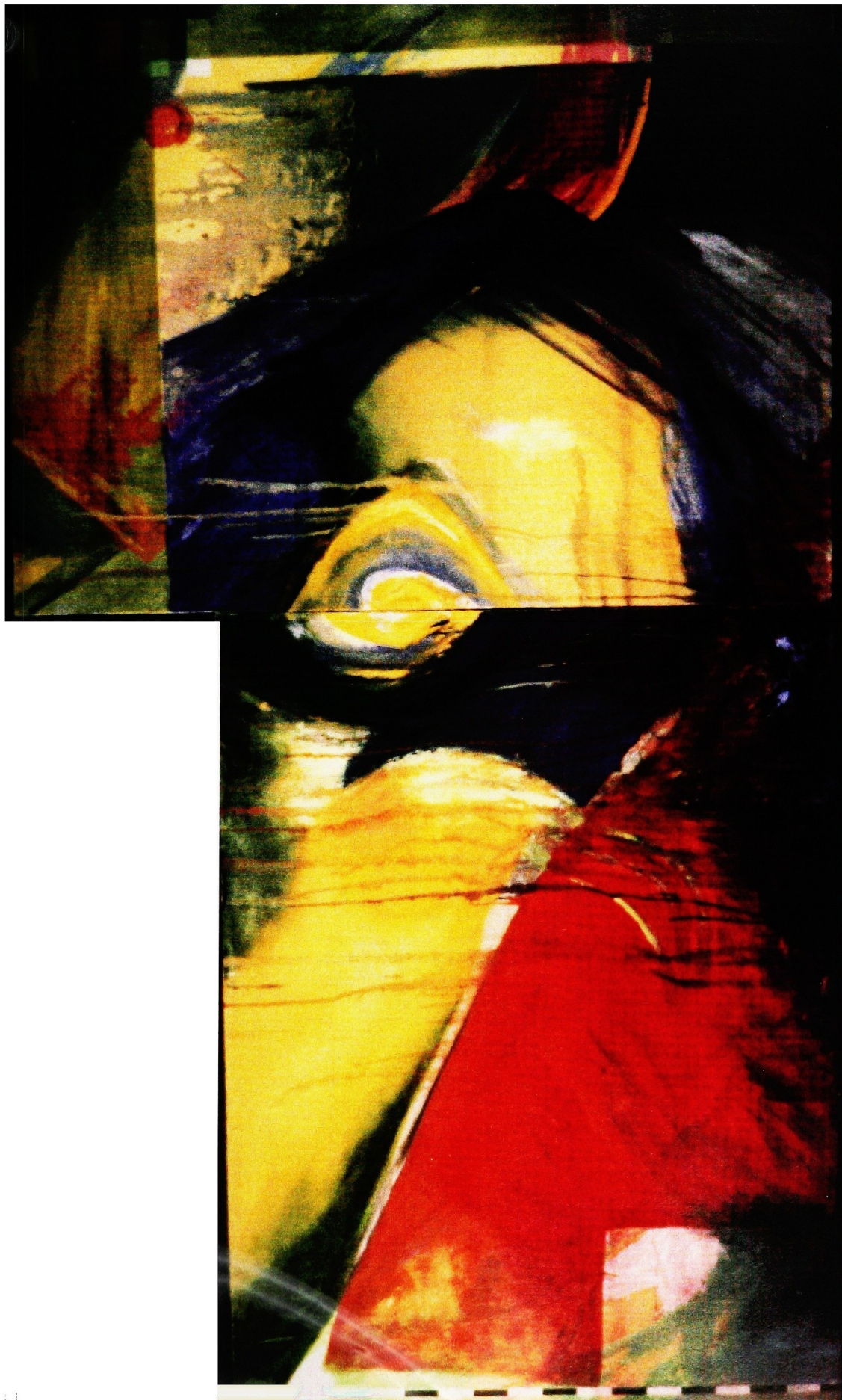
Fig. 5

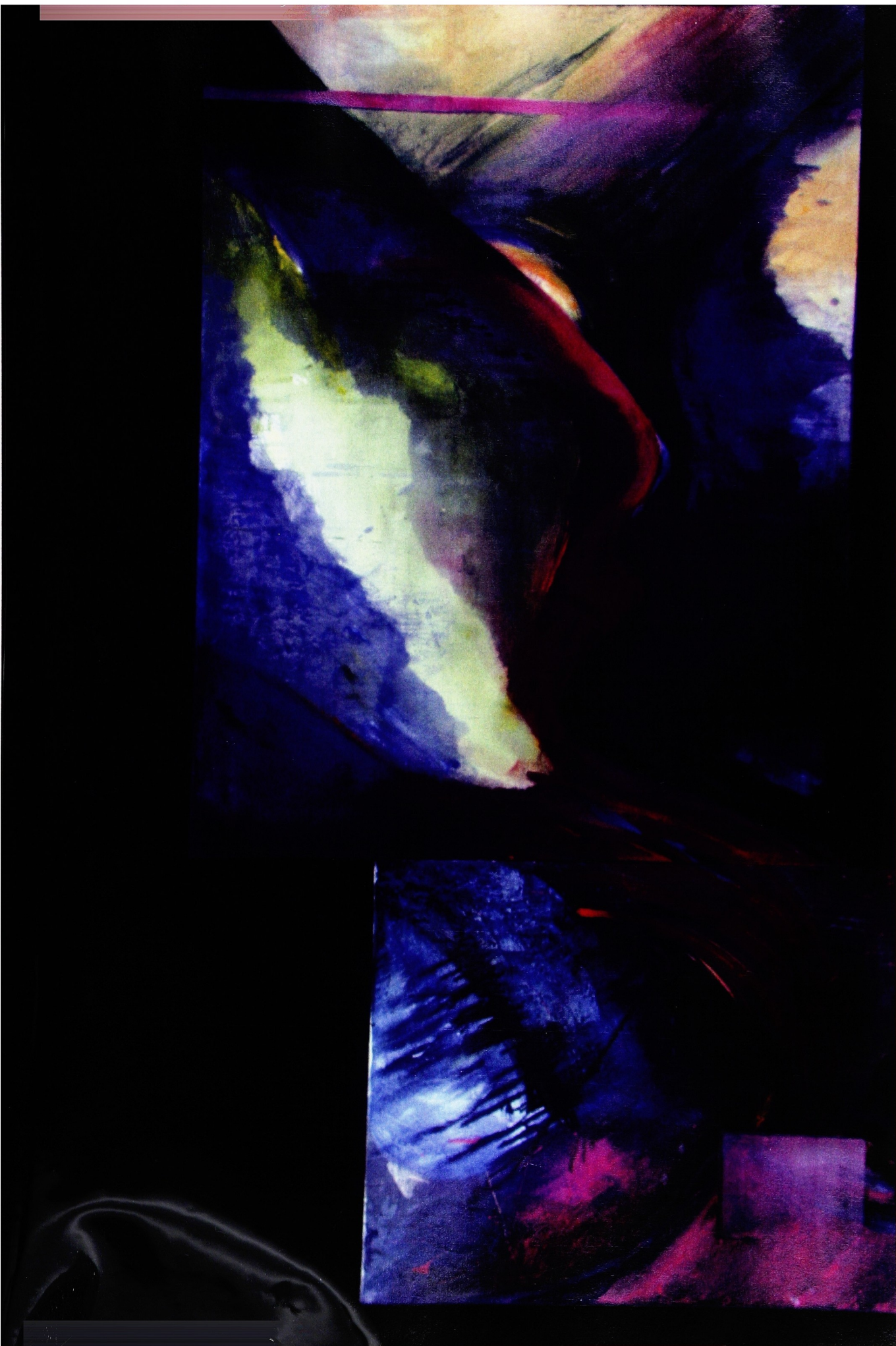


Fig. 6

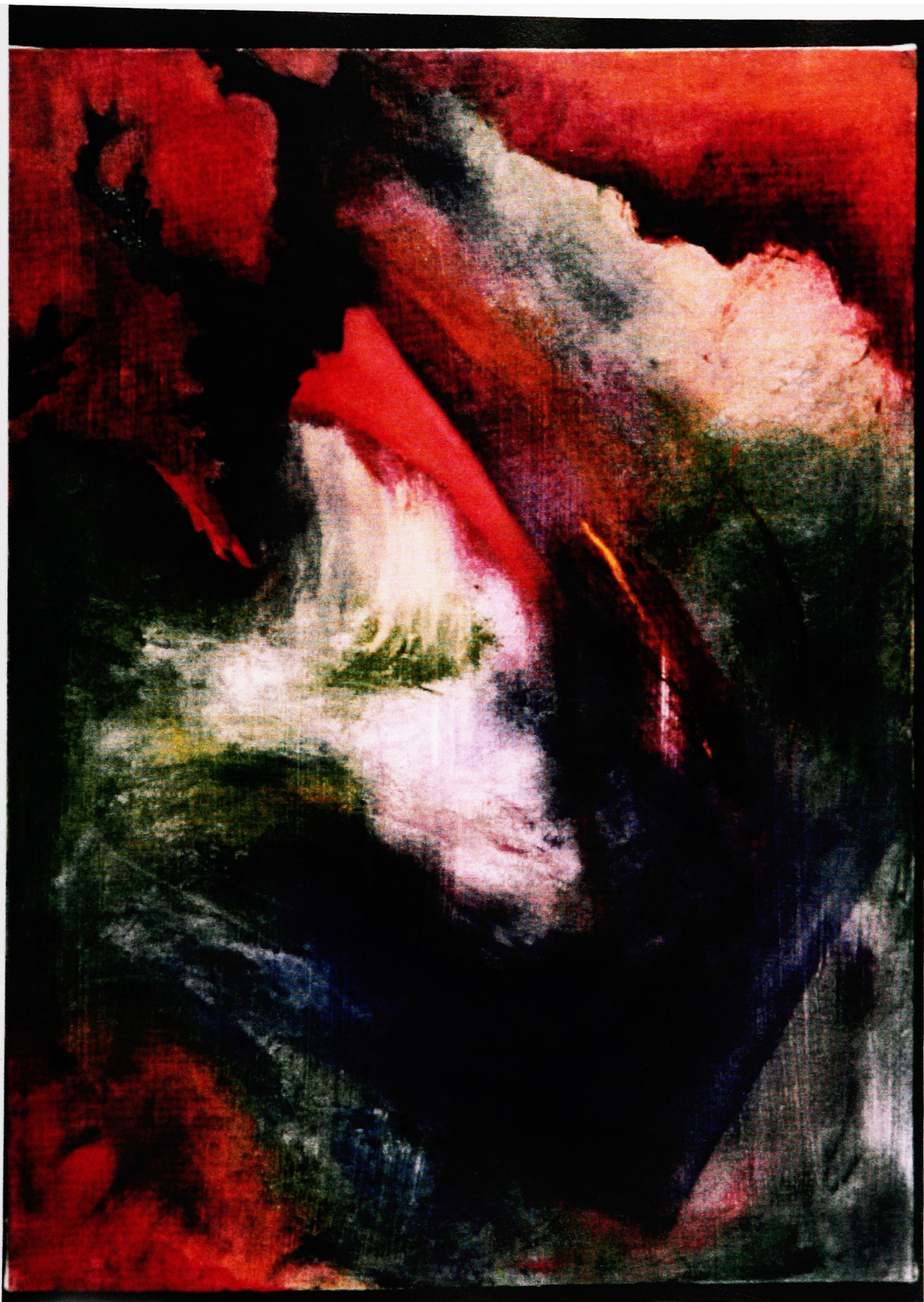


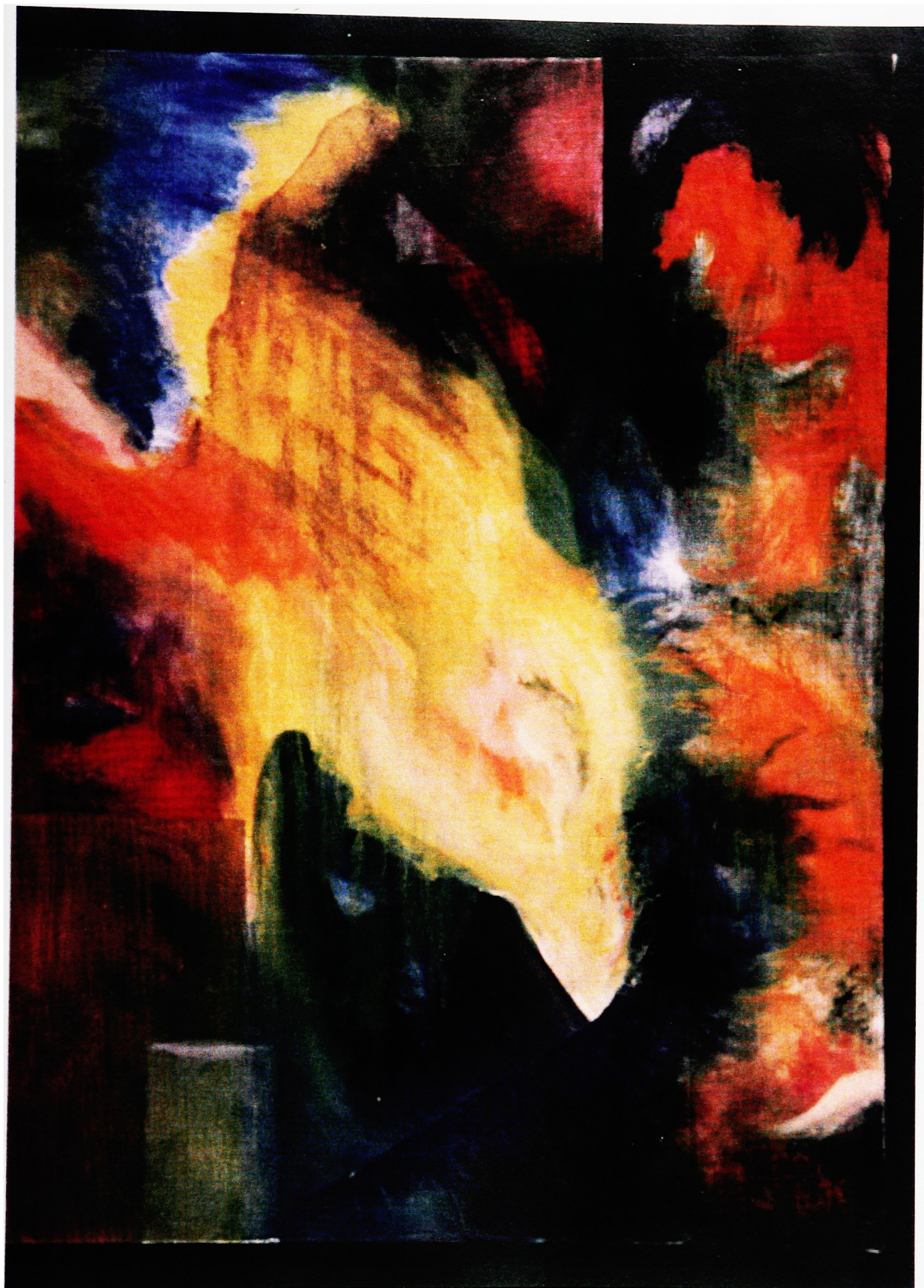












LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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1. Pat Steir, Three Green Days, 1972.
2. Pat Steir, Border Lord, 1972.
3. Nancy Graves, Librium, 1975.
4. Nancy Graves, Untitled (Heat Density Cyclone), 1974.
5. Jasper Johns, Map, 1961.
6. Helen Frankenthaler, Barcelona, 1977.

Illustrations for the Thesis

1. Key Series I, 1992.
2. Key Series II, 1992.
3. The Baltic, 1992.
4. Marking the Land, 1992.
5. Red Land Red Sea, 1992.
6. Exposure, 1992.
7. From Above, 1992.

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